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CODESRIA: 30 years of Scholarly Publishing

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Abstract

In this essay, the authors examine the role of CODESRIA in African knowledge production and distribution since its founding some three decades ago. The authors also discuss the motivation for the creation of CODESRIA, as well as the challenges, achievements, and promises of this pan African research organization in developing a culture of scholarly publishing and dissemination in the continent.

Key terms: CODESRIA, African scholarship, culture of scholarly publishing and dissemination, multidisciplinary social research

Résumé

Dans cet essai, les auteurs se penchent sur le rôle du CODESRIA dans la production de connaissances en Afrique et leur diffusion, depuis sa création il y a une trentaine d'années. Ils traitent également des facteurs qui ont motivé la fondation du CODESRIA, ainsi que des problèmes, réalisations et promesses de cet organisme de recherche panafricain qui contribue à forger une culture de publication et de dissémination des travaux de recherche sur le continent.

Mots clés : CODESRIA, recherche scientifique en Afrique, culture de publication et de dissémination des travaux de recherche, recherche sociale multidisciplinaire, publication sciences humaines

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Introduction

The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) was created in 1973 for the purpose of promoting multidisciplinary social research which derives from and is relevant to the experience of the African continent and its peoples. This meant from the outset, a policy to encourage social scientific research on various aspects of life and society. It also entailed the development of a programme of student grants and fellowships designed to promote the cultivation of talent and a thirst for competitive and high quality scholarship (through methodology workshops, seminars, essays and dissertation competitions) among young and promising scholars. The council also strived to offer an outlet for the formulation and expression of African perspectives and scholarship and, in so doing, enabling a contribution to ongoing debates on the continent and the world through a scholarly publications programme. Over the years, CODESRIA's publications mission has evolved and crystallised to encompass the following objectives:

- Promoting greater visibility and competitiveness for African scholarship informed by perspectives that are organic to the concerns of the continent.
- Offering a forum for scholars in various disciplines and fields of the Social Sciences and Humanities in and on Africa to share research findings, debate perspectives, exchange ideas, and forge new dimensions of interconnections between theory and practice in the interest of African realities.
- Contributing to the development of a culture of scholarly publishing in Africa and, through this contribution, help to strengthen the institutional basis of scholarly publishing and knowledge production.
- Promoting excellence in publishing as well as the development of an African community of Social Science and Humanities scholars who cross-reference one another in active dialogue, debate and discussion on the manner in which scholarship is to understand, interpret and ultimately contribute towards desired social change in Africa.
- Encouraging knowledge production and dissemination by female scholars and younger academics both generally and, more especially, through books and special issues of journals that focus on themes targeting women and youth for contributions and readership.
- Encouraging the development of a reading and writing culture among African scholars, including support to younger scholars for the development of skills for academic publishing.

Why CODESRIA?

The creation of CODESRIA was also partly motivated by a perceived need for greater recognition and representation for what Africa and African social scientists had to offer in discourses where they were often reduced to passive observers whose role was to implement and not to think. The prevalent high rejection rate for African scholarship in Northern journals and books, for example, meant that African scholars had basically to choose between bending over backwards to accommodate debates whose origins and assumptions were at variance with the burning questions and concerns of their continent, or to create and sustain alternative outlets for their own research informed by greater relevance in theory and practice, and in tune with the diverse expectations and aspirations of Africans. Providing for a strong publications and dissemination component of CODESRIA was a clear indication that the founding fathers and mothers of this pan-African organisation had opted for independence of thought and scholarship, as well as a critical engagement with the African world.

CODESRIA's role, since its founding, has been to ensure that African social scientists and scholarship would not perish simply as a result of rejection by publishers elsewhere. The organization has also ensured that the general absence of university presses in the continent, or financially handicap, or the political situation in a number of regions in Africa would thwart the dreams of the scholarly community for independent critical publications on Africa by Africans. In this regard, it was expected that social scientists would have CODESRIA to rely on: a publisher that would be more understanding of the what, how, and why of their scholarship, without necessarily sacrificing scientific expectations.

One of the objectives of the publications policy states clearly that: 'Publications shall be of the highest scientific quality, achieved through a rigorous peer-review system sustained by African scholars and scholars of Africa.' The fact that CODESRIA was not just a publisher but also a sponsor of research was even more helpful. It encouraged scholars to apply for sponsored research at national, regional and continental levels, knowing that the outcome would be a publication. Scholars awarded research grants were expected to work with a view to having their results published, and were, therefore, encouraged to be rigorous and empirically grounded from the outset. Today, all scholars funded by CODESRIA, or simply seeking publication through it, have the benefit of a style guide prepared by the Department of Publications and Dissemination.¹ The fact that funded research is often undertaken by teams of scholars, works in favour of multiple voices, even when the researchers happen to share the

same disciplinary background. In general, the tendency has been and remains to encourage scholars to work together across disciplines, and to ensure representation along the lines of gender, region, language and generation.

Support for scholars

The various programmes are conceived and structured with scholarly excellence and publications of quality in mind. Since training is required to produce scholarship of excellence, CODESRIA has put in place a rigorous training programme through which it attempts to accommodate and cater for the needs and interests of young and upcoming researchers, mid-career scholars and the most senior and experienced members of the African academy. Activities developed and promoted for this purpose range from the award of small grants for thesis-writing in African universities and the organisation of a number of annual, theme-specific 'summer institutes', to the funding of methodological training sessions, the award of advanced research fellowships, a textbook project, the convening of an Annual Social Science Campus, and the launching of an initiative on the Intellectual History of Africa. Thus, although the various training activities undertaken are tailored to serve the needs of specific sections of the social research community, they also constitute an important element in the effort to mobilise all the social research constituencies active on the continent. And the best evidence of that mobilisation can be seen in the diverse menu CODESRIA offers in terms of publications.

For younger scholars, and with publication in mind, the support covers financial grants for fieldwork, provision of bibliographies, textbooks and journals as well as support in understanding research methods. The laureates of the Small Grants Programme benefit from training offered at regional methodology workshops for graduate students. These workshops are designed to equip the younger generation with the latest research tools and materials needed for their research. They also provide an opportunity for the laureates to tap into the experience of established researchers in their fields from within and beyond the continent. The interaction, which this programme offers older and younger scholars, not only promotes a structured system of 'mentoring' but also encourages an inter-generational and multidisciplinary dialogue. Plans are under way to incorporate scholarly writing for publication as a key dimension of future methodology workshops.

In 2002, CODESRIA launched a programme designed to encourage postgraduate research in Africa by offering three prizes annually for the best theses produced within Africa, to be managed by an independent jury

of eminent scholars. The Advanced Research Fellowships Programme is designed to target scholars who are usually in the early post-doctoral stages of their academic careers, although it is not uncommon for senior scholars also to compete for the awards. The fellowship is designed to provide the beneficiaries with an opportunity to initiate new research programmes or to carry existing research concerns further. In this sense, the programme is aimed at creating and sustaining a community of highly skilled intellectuals whose work is, or has the potential of being, at the cutting edge of social research and knowledge production.

Publications programme

Over the years, different outlets have been developed for the scholarship sponsored, and for scholarship not directly sponsored. The bulk of publications in the form of books, monographs and working papers result directly from the research it supports through its Departments of Research and of Training and Grants. Increasingly, it also commissions books on targeted themes for general readership or for specific consumers, with a view to fulfilling its research agenda. In order to stay competitive in the aggressive realm of publishing, CODESRIA simultaneously shops around for relevant scholarship of excellence produced without its support for publication, subject to mutually agreed conditions between the authors and CODESRIA. It remains open to collaboration with various partners and advocacy groups whose vision, mission, and objectives are in accordance with its own. In particular, CODESRIA plans to work closely with various faculties and departments within academic institutions as well as university presses and others to identify theses, dissertations, and other research work for publication, and encourage experts to set up and run book series in particular disciplines and fields of study. As a pan-African organisation with a constituency that draws from different linguistic repertoires, and one which is conscious of the need to encourage greater communication and interchange among African scholars, CODESRIA publishes and encourages publications in Arabic, English, French and Portuguese.

Seven bilingual and multilingual journals are published, with a combined total of well over 1,300 published articles to date, excluding book reviews.² In addition, the Council publishes a quarterly bulletin, the *CODESRIA Bulletin/Bulletin du CODESRIA*, that serves as a lively debating forum for new ideas and questions central to the quest for better understanding African experiences. The *Bulletin* is published in Arabic, English, French and, since 2004, Portuguese. Furthermore, in collaboration with the Arab Research Centre based in Cairo, the Council produces

an African Studies Series published in Arabic under the title *Afro-Arab Selections for Social Sciences*. Similarly, in December 2003, the maiden issue of the much-anticipated *Africa Review of Books/Revue Africaine de Livres* was launched. The Review emerged out of a shared concern in the African social research community that considered it expedient to create a forum for a critical presentation of books produced on Africa within and outside the continent. Plans are also at an advanced stage to support the revival of a number of journals as part of CODESRIA's efforts to support the development of African scholarly associations.

Since 1973, CODESRIA has produced over 260 published works. These can be found in the Book Series/Series de Livres; Monographs/Monographies; the Green Book Series/Livres verts; the State of the Literature/Etat de la littérature; the New Path Series/ Nouvelles pistes; and the Réseau de politiques économiques. The CODESRIA Book Series boasts over 110 books published since its launch in 1981. A host of reference works, including the *Index of African Social Science Periodical Articles*, the *Register of Development Research Projects in Africa*, the *Directory of Development Research and Training Institutes in Africa* and a CD-ROM on *Social Sciences & Aids in Africa* have been produced by the Council.

Within the framework of the Civil Society programme managed in collaboration with the UNDP, a newsletter known as the *Civic Agenda* was produced. CODESRIA's role in providing a platform for research in the social sciences and humanities in Africa is outstanding. For example, between 1982 and 1992, five leading social science journals in the North published only 233 articles by African authors. Within the same period, a single CODESRIA journal, *Africa Development*, published 246 articles, with over 200 of these by African authors. CODESRIA has published authors from every region in Africa; and remains the foremost academic institution in Africa to publish in Arabic, English, French, and Portuguese, the most widely used languages in academic discourse on the continent today.

The Council's publications programme has been very successful not only in projecting the output of African scholars but, equally important, in contributing path-breaking works. This is attested to by the range of award-winning publications, which have been produced under the CODESRIA Book Series. These include: *A Modern Economic History of Africa*, by P.T. Zeleza (Noma Award for Publishing in Africa); *La Nette des Autres*, edited by J. Ki-Zerbo (Prix Rencontre de la Communauté européenne); *Manufacturing African Studies and Crises* by P.T. Zeleza (Special Commendation, Noma Award); *Index of African Social Science Peri-*

odical Articles, CODESRIA (Conover Porter Prize); *Sénégal: Trajectoires d'un État (1960-1990)*, edited by M.C. Diop (Honourable Mention Prix Rencontre de la Communauté européenne); and *The Feasibility of Democracy in Africa*, by Claude Ake (Choice Outstanding Academic Title Award).

A vigorous dissemination drive ensures that research produced by Africans and on Africa is accessible in both electronic and non-electronic versions of CODESRIA journals, conference papers and reports. It subsidises the cost of its publications marketed in Africa, and offers free copies to review outlets. CODESRIA undertakes a regular dissemination exercise at which selected titles from its recent publications list are presented to a critical audience of scholars, policy makers, students, journalists and representatives of international organisations. While the various book, monograph, and working document series have served as outlets for CODESRIA sponsored research, conferences, workshops and seminars, the journals have facilitated debate and interchange more generally.

Peer review

If CODESRIA has succeeded in establishing itself as a leading scholarly publisher, this has largely been because of the rigorous peer-review system it has set in place. All articles published in its journals undergo a standard process. All contributions and books published are either products of CODESRIA co-ordinated research with clear scientific and methodological guidance mechanisms, or unsolicited manuscripts from seasoned scholars subjected to rigorous peer review. Members of CODESRIA, scholars on Africa and social scientists around the world have, over the years, contributed in reviewing submissions, and in ensuring the quality and competitiveness of what CODESRIA publishes. Their support has been a 'labour of love', as CODESRIA could never afford to pay reviewers the full worth of their expertise, time and commitment to contributing to the edification of social scientific scholarship on and in Africa.

In line with its policy of undertaking publications in collaboration with or on behalf of relevant professional associations of scholars in various disciplines and fields of the Social Sciences and Humanities, CODESRIA's strategy is to have a peer-reviewer database as broad and representative as possible, to guarantee that every perspective shall be accommodated, and also, to avoid overworking or abusing the generosity of reviewers who are always ready to help out. With this in mind, the secretariat in Dakar encourages scholars to submit their CVs indicating their specialisations and areas of interest, which are constantly updated.

Reviewers are encouraged to be substantive in their comments, since CODESRIA is interested not only in whether or not a paper is suitable for publication, but in the reasons for the decision. This is because CODESRIA sees itself as a special type of scholarly publisher, with a mission not only to harvest the best, but also to assist young, female, and promising researchers to cultivate the art of excellence in writing for scholarly publications. This means that a paper is seldom rejected offhand as not publishable, even when it is clearly substandard. More experienced scholars have an obligation to be patient with their less articulate counterparts, and to assist them in every way to become better writers.

Editorial organisation

CODESRIA depends considerably on editors and editorial boards to realise its publication mission. Its guidelines on the selection of editors and members of editorial advisory boards are quite clear. All Editors of CODESRIA journals are expected to be African scholars based on the continent or in the Diaspora, with good knowledge of CODESRIA and with a proven track record of excellence in competitive scholarship of relevance to the journal in question. Editors are designated by the CODESRIA secretariat in consultation with the Scientific and Executive Committees. In cases where the journal is published for an affiliated professional scholarly association, the CODESRIA secretariat consults with the association as well. Each journal generally has four editors, whose selection is informed by scholarship, language, region and gender. Editors are appointed for a minimum of three years and a maximum of five years.

Editorial Advisory Boards of CODESRIA journals are constituted by the secretariat, in consultation with the relevant Editors of journals. They comprise a majority of reputed African scholars (based on the continent and/or in the Diaspora) and a minority of non-African scholars of Africa with perspectives consistent with CODESRIA's mission and in tune with Africa's quest for better recognition and representation in knowledge production and consumption. When and where excellence exists across the board, care is taken to represent the various disciplines, languages, regions, genders and generations within the CODESRIA constituency. Each CODESRIA journal is limited to a maximum of 20 Editorial Advisory Board members, whose names are duly included in the inside cover and on the relevant page of the CODESRIA website. Editorial Advisory Board members participate actively in CODESRIA's publications activities as peer-reviewers and advisers on themes for journals and book projects. Together with the editors they constitute a rich database of peer-reviewers

for their journals and ensure that the expertise of these reviewers is well tapped. Editorial Advisory Board members serve as peer-reviewers and guest editors of special issues and advise on the overall style and direction and on how to make the journal serve the readership better. At conferences and seminars, they are expected to shop for papers of relevance to their journals, making these available to the editors. In turn, Editorial Advisory Board members are entitled to a free subscription to the journal with which they are involved and have their names listed in alphabetical order on the inside cover. They are also able to view accepted papers, should they wish, before these come out in print. Each Editorial Advisory Board member serves for three years, renewable once.

In order to develop a mutually supportive network of editors and better co-ordinate CODESRIA's various publications, the Secretariat organises an Annual Conference of Editors of CODESRIA Journals, at which each journal is represented by the Editor in Chief, and one other participant selected from among the editors and editorial advisory board members. Each editorial board contributes in the preparation of the agenda for the Annual Conference of Editors by the Department of Publications and Dissemination at CODESRIA. At these conferences and in general, editors are encouraged to: recognise and promote CODESRIA's ideals, mission and objectives in their choice of what is published, without, of course, compromising on the need for quality and competitive scholarship; draw from, as well as enrich, the CODESRIA peer-reviewer database managed and regularly updated by the Department of Publications and Dissemination at the Secretariat; ensure that their journals reflect their CODESRIA identity in terms of logo, style, format, quality and the quest for overall excellence; adopt the CODESRIA style guide, and make this available to potential authors, guest-editors, editorial advisory board members and printers; use their pages where and whenever possible to promote other journals and publications of CODESRIA; enhance dissemination and marketability of their journals by working to ensure quality content and cutting edge scholarship; save costs wherever possible, using the technology at their disposal; actively facilitate the online presence of CODESRIA by providing electronic copies of each issue of their journals to the web manager for processing; and encourage young and female researchers to publish, through a supportive review system.

In addition, the conference serves as a forum for the sharing of experiences, the discussion of new trends in journal publishing, the streamlining of strategies and a discussion on the state of knowledge production and scholarly publishing on the continent. Sometimes, special guests with par-

ticular experiences in certain aspects of publishing are invited to address the editors. For the meeting of 2002, Professor Paul Zeleza was invited to lead the discussion on Electronic publishing, in preparation for the launching of the CODESRIA African Journals Online initiative. For 2003, the special guests included Dr. Jeff Lever, a sociologist who has doubled as a copyeditor for the *African Sociological Review*, and who regularly copyedits for CODESRIA's other publications as well. Dr. Lever shared his experiences of copyediting social scientific work and drew attention to the issues that editors must be sensitive to if they are to ensure the scientific and linguistic qualities of what they publish. Professor Abebe Zegeye of UNISA press was also present to lead the discussion on scholarly publishing in Africa.

Conclusion

CODESRIA has, through its various programmes, consistently promoted African social science research that is rooted in the African experience and speaks to the interests and concerns of the African people. In addition, it has promoted the publication and dissemination of African scholarship, providing opportunities for African scholars to share their research findings and contributing to the development of a culture of scholarly publishing on the continent, which, hopefully, will continue to grow stronger in the future.

Notes

1. 'CODESRIA Guide for Authors', p. 19.
2. *Africa Development / Afrique et développement; Africa Media Review/Revue Africaine Des Medias, African Sociological Review / Revue africaine de sociologie; African Journal of International Affairs/ Revue africaine des relations internationales; Afrika Zamani: A Journal of African History; Identity, Culture and Politics: an Afro-Asian Dialogue; Journal of Higher Education in Africa / Revue de l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique.*